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THE HISTORY OF A GREAT INDUSTRY

BY

JOHN LUCHSINGER

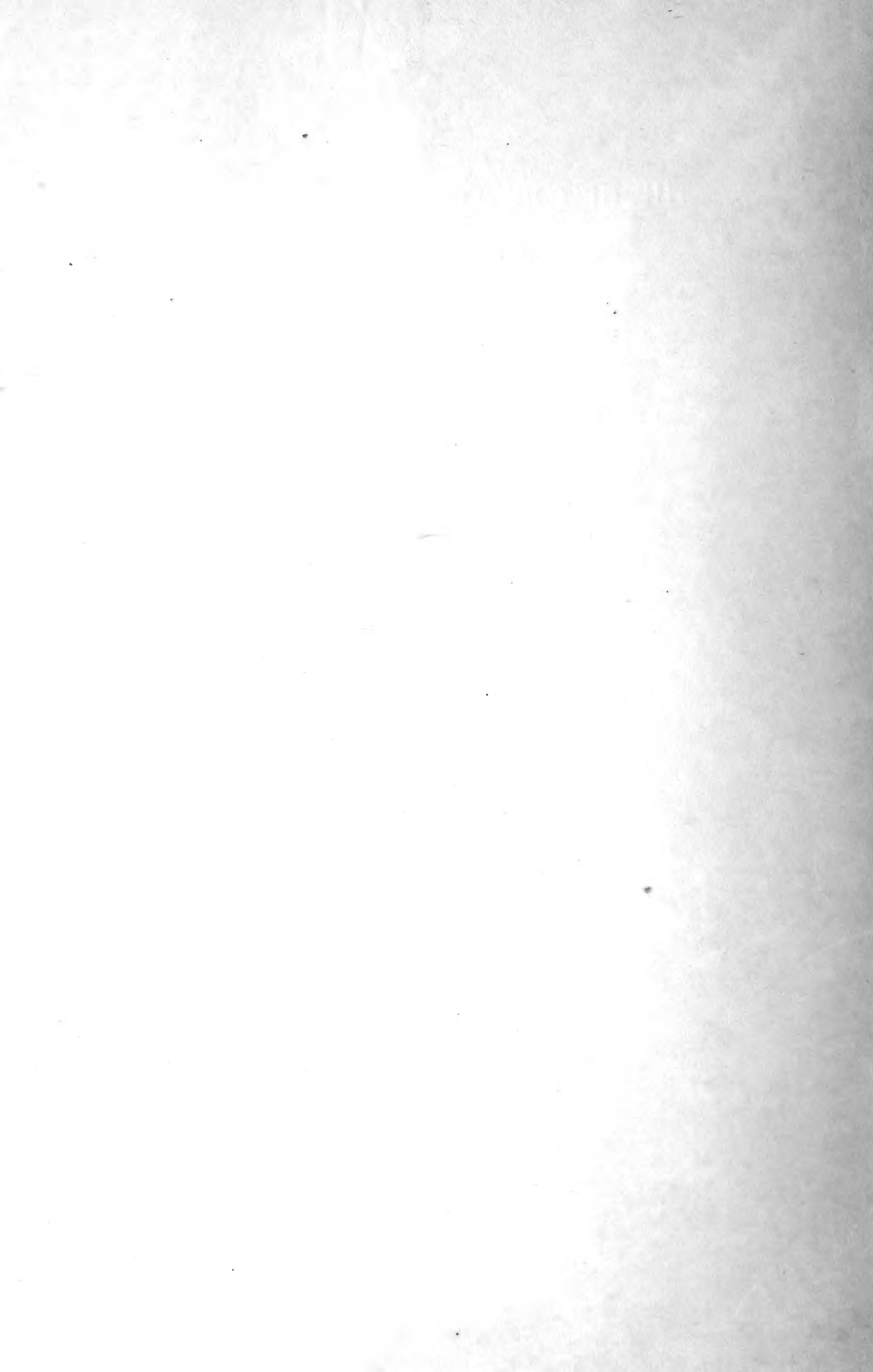
Historian of the Swiss Colony at New Glarus

[From Proceedings of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898]

MADISON

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

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THE HISTORY OF A GREAT INDUSTRY.¹

BY JOHN LUCHSINGER.

That portion of Wisconsin which lies west of Rock River and south of the Wisconsin is the blue-grass region of the State,—underlaid with limestone, the work and product of ages on ages of beings that lived, worked, and perished, their remains piled up in petrified masses; when crumbled by frost and softened by rains, they give up their long-stored substance to nourish the rich vegetation which now flourishes above. The luxuriant blue-grass which covers hill and dale, is the means by which nature draws from the old and buried past, nourishment and life for the present. It covers the surface as with a dense carpet; frost and drouth cannot stifle it so long as its roots are nourished by the exhaustless stock of limestone beneath. Hill and valley afford the finest pastures and meadows for the many herds of dairy cattle which one sees; and these produce the milk from which is made the excellent butter and cheese for which this region is noted.

Cheese factories and creameries dot the landscape, more and more frequently, as one gets nearer the hills and among them. The little city of Monroe, county seat of Green county, is in the very midst of the cheese region. Beautifully located on a high, rolling plateau, it has a progressive, intelligent population of nearly 4,000. In this county are two hundred cheese factories and thirty creameries. Practically all of the farmers are interested in the dairy business. Ten million pounds of cheese were made in this county alone, in the year 1898; and nearly as much more in the counties adjoining.

While this is a remarkable showing of the extent of this business, yet the most interesting and singular feature about

¹ Address before the State Historical Convention at Madison, February 23, 1899.

it is the fact that all or nearly all of this cheese is of the foreign or fancy varieties; not one per cent is of the American, or standard cheddar kind. The most of it is the well known Swiss cheese. Another noteworthy fact is that nearly all of those engaged in making this cheese, and in buying and selling it, are Swiss or of Swiss origin. It is as common to hear, in Green county, broad Swiss spoken, and to hear the Yodel song from far-away Switzerland, as to hear German in Milwaukee.

How this great business originated and grew to its present dimensions is an interesting study. How, from extremely humble and small beginnings made by people driven by poverty to found new homes in this once wild land, it has been possible to establish this immense industry, is an object lesson of the highest value, especially to those who, impatient of step-by-step advancement, would jump at one bound into greatness. No nation ever became great suddenly; no great business or fortune has ever been built up, except by patient and persistent work. Even character and reputation are formed little by little, by every-day actions, words and thoughts. So this great dairy industry does not owe its greatness to large investment of capital, loud advertising or lucky speculation. Patient toil and wise use of the little germs of knowledge of this business, which a few Swiss immigrants fifty-four years ago brought with them, have accomplished this great work.

America, since its discovery by Europeans, has been peopled by swarm after swarm of colonists detached from the great European hive. Religious persecutions, political troubles, and wars have caused many such emigrations; but poverty, that greatest mover of man's energies and ambitions, did more to bring colonists here than all other causes. And poverty, or rather the energy it begot, caused the origin of this remarkable business.

Switzerland, from a farmer's view, is one of the most sterile countries of Europe. More than half its surface is unfit for cultivation, because of rocks and glaciers. Its people get a living only by unceasing work and strict frugality. It is rich only in heroic history, grand scenery and an ever-overflowing population.

From that country, in 1845, forced by economic necessity, twenty-seven families came to Wisconsin. Like the bees before swarming, they had sent in advance two pioneers to spy out the land and find a suitable settling place. These two, after months of weary travel through nearly all of the Northwestern States, passed by the broad rich prairies of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Missouri, near to commerce and transportation, as unfit for their purpose, and, among the roughest hills of Green county, selected the location for the colony, which complied closest with the instructions they had, to secure a location as like old Switzerland as possible, that there might be less homesickness.

The colony after a journey of four months — down the Rhine to the ocean in boats, across the ocean to Baltimore in a sailing vessel, thence to Galena by canal and steamer, from Galena to Green county on foot — clustered in the little valley of New Glarus, and began the usual work of the early settler.¹ Here, the greatest of all industries in southern Wisconsin had its birth. Just as soon as the settler owned a cow, the germ of knowledge of cheesemaking, which he had brought with him, began to sprout. At first, infinitely small was the growth; a pailful of milk, a little copper kettle, and a wooden hoop split from a sapling, were the beginnings of the industry. Cheeses no larger than a saucer, which could be held by the hand of a child, were the ancestors of the 200-lb. Swiss cheese now standard.

The little kettle, used for cooking purposes and hung in the fireplace of the log cabin, was the predecessor of the cheese-factory, with all its conveniences, of today. The wife and daughter were the first cheesemakers, because the men could spare no time from the work of clearing, breaking and fencing. They went to work with what poor means were at their command; their cheeses became larger and better, as increase in cows and experience came, and a steady and remunerative market was created for what could be spared. Up to 1870, cheese was not made by any factory system; each cheese dairy used only the milk produced on one farm. Of course a spirit of emulation

¹ See Mr. Luchsinger's historical sketch, "The Planting of the Swiss Colony at New Glarus, Wis.," *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xi.—Ed.

arose, and it became a matter of pride to produce better cheese than others.

A little incident witnessed by the writer, illustrates the feeling then prevailing. Two settlers named Rudy and George met. Rudy said to George: "I have had splendid cheese this season; I have sold two wagon loads at Madison for 12 cents a pound, and am going to Freeport next week with another load for which I expect 13 cents a pound. I have but a very few inferior cheese."

George listened and smoked, and said nothing until Rudy closed his talk by saying: "How is it with you, George? Have you hauled off any of your cheese?"

George slowly took his pipe from his mouth and said, "No."

"Why, what is the matter; ain't your cheese ripe?"

"Nothing is the matter," said George, "I have no cheese to haul away; I have sold them all as fast as they have ripened, right at home, for 14 cents a pound."

Cheesemaking by dairy farmers continued to increase, but wheat-growing was, until 1870, the principal business of the farmer. Then came the chinch bugs in such swarms as to ruin not only the wheat crops but also barley, oats, and corn. Wheat farmers realized that a change must be made in their business, or the insect pests would devour their farms. Those in debt became more deeply involved. The young men were leaving the country for the farther West, preferring the hardships of a frontier life to being debt-ridden here.

Then it was that the cheese factory came. Two small factories were built by farmers in the roughest parts of the county; but, inexperienced and timid as they were, it required no small amount of argument and persuasion to get them to invest the necessary labor and money. Modest and inexpensive as the original venture was, the first year's results showed that climate, soil, grass, and people were well adapted to the profitable production of cheese in factories.

So, year after year, more factories, in ever-widening circles, were put up; more kinds of cheese began to be made; better methods of making were used; the result was, a uniformity in quality, and an increasing market not attained under the old system, which was very soon abandoned.

N. Gerber, J. Regez, and J. Karlen were the pioneers of the factory system here, as applied to making Swiss and fancy cheese.

Until very recently, all of the cheesemakers were Swiss, and for the most part imported, as no dairy school in this State teaches the making of fancy cheese.

It is now acknowledged that Wisconsin-Swiss cheese is the equal of that made in Switzerland. It has captured the American market; it is regularly quoted in the markets of all our cities; it has come to stay. Why not? With Swiss farmers, Swiss cheesers, Swiss merchants, the best of grasses and water, and intelligent management, it cannot fail to produce an article which has reduced importation of foreign cheese to a minimum.

I will only add that in the dairy section named, farmers of all nationalities have perforce been drawn into the production of dairy goods. Very few there are who are not directly or indirectly connected with this business, which, with its necessary accompaniments of regular, steady work and intelligent attention all the year round, has done much to make southwestern Wisconsin one of the most law-abiding, intelligent, progressive, and prosperous farming sections of the whole country.

